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ABSTRACT

The Partnership for Academic and Career Education (PACE), established in 1987, is a consortium bringing together the seven school districts of Anderson, Oconee, and Pickins counties in South Carolina (representing 16 high schools and 4 secondary vocational/career centers); local businesses; and Tri-County Technical College (TCTC). Seeking to eliminate gaps and overlaps between secondary and postsecondary programs while providing incentives for students to stay in school and graduate into meaningful employment, the current program design begins in grade 9, emphasizing a strong academic foundation, complemented by occupational coursework. The program emphasizes employment opportunities in the mid-level technologies, requiring vocational training up to and including an associate degree. For students in grades 9-12, specific academic and occupational courses are developed around four cluster areas: industrial/engineering technologies; business technologies; health technologies; and public service technologies. Five of the seven districts have replaced General Education with an enrollment in either Tech Prep or College Prep course sequences. A study conducted by TCTC in 1991 has shown increased enrollments and applications for admission as a result of the program. In addition, there has been a growing interest in plant tours of local business, as well as campus tours. Additional funding for PACE has made it possible to hire a full-time coordinator, and newly planned activities include development of advanced technologies certificates; expanding articulation between high schools, TCTC, and four-year institutions; and developing improved advising manuals for students. (PAA)

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Tech Prep: Challenges and Opportunities For Commmunity Colleges

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Contrary to popular opinion, the American public education system is not in decline, it's in transition. In fact, there are some revolutionary ideas brewing in education across the country, ideas that have the potential to address many of our nation's most pressing problems and ideas that hold real promise for millions of students. These ideas are "packaged" in a concept called Tech Prep and they rely on the collaborative efforts of schools, community colleges' and businesses. While much has been written on the role of secondary schools in Tech Prep and the impact of the program on the high school level, less attention has been given to the effect Tech Prep has on community colleges and the critical role these institutions play in making the potential of Tech Prep a reality. But Tech Prep has more to offer community colleges than a catalytic role in an educational revolution. As partners in the Tech Prep game plan, community colleges can be winners too, but it won't be easy and it won't happen overnight.

WHAT IS TECH PREP?

Let's begin by defining Tech Prep, or trying to. I've been in the Tech Prep "business" since October of 1988 and I have probably run into dozens of definitions and approaches as I have talked to people from across the country, read the literature and attended a conference here and there. The reauthorization of the Perkins Act in 1990[2] has provided some parameters for defining Tech Prep programs, but most practitioners will tell you that Tech Prep can and should be more than what's outlined in the legislation. In this article, I will discuss one approach to Tech Prep—the one that has evolved for the consortium which I represent. Our definition has been taking shape since about 1985 when Dale Parnell wrote The Neglected Majority[3]. It's an approach that has resulted from making mistakes (and some big ones, I don't mind telling you!), from listening to our secondary and postsecondary partners, from the input of the business community, and maybe from a certain degree of common sense. It is also an approach that has evolved specifically to meet the needs of our local area, and while we hope there are aspects of what we've done that might be useful to others, we are not suggesting that we've found the "answer" and that all other programs should be patterned after our approach. (After all, the whole point of Tech Prep, in my opinion, is to develop programs, community by community, that meet local needs.)

Our consortium, the Partnership for Academic and Career Education (PACE), was formally established in May of 1987 after almost two years of discussion among the local school superintendents, business leaders and key administrators of Tri-County Technical College. At the time, the driving force behind the formation of the consortium and the development of Tech Prep programs was the enthusiasm and leadership of Dr. Don C. Garrison, president of the college. While the consortium membership has expanded considerably since 1987, it still involves the seven school districts of Anderson, Oconee and Pickens counties (representing 16 high schools and four secondary vocational/career centers), several local businesses and Tri-County Technical College. With the establishment of a consortium Coordinating Board, a small administrative staff and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's FIPSE program, we were on our way. (Well, we thought so at the time, but actually we were a good two years away from really being "on our way.")

In the beginning there were plenty of problems and frustrations. While many people expressed enthusiasm for the basic idea, there were a few others thinking, "This is the best recruiting scheme for Tri-County Technical College I've ever seen!" (It's important to remember that we got into Tech Prep long before it was a national movement. And, with a state system of technical colleges, it's easy to understand why some people thought it was probably more recruiting than the beginning of an educational revolution.) We started with a "2+2" approach targeted to high school students enrolled in general education programs. This was in line with the way we interpreted Parnell's theories—that the traditional college prep and vocational programs were effective but that the general education program, which enrolled up to 50% of the student population while providing inadequate preparation for employment or college, should be the focal point for Tech Prep. The 2+2" approach didn't last long in our area for two major reasons. First, the participating schools thought that waiting until grade 11 was too late to

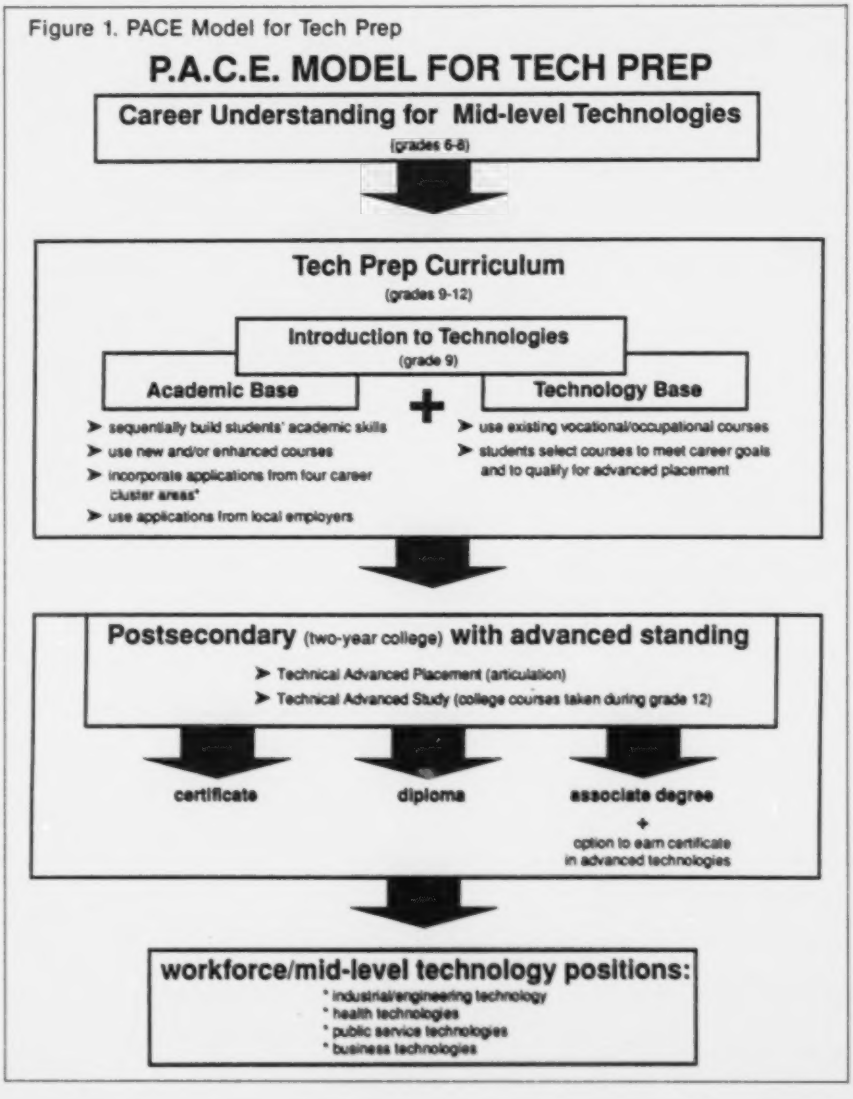
motivate at-risk students who had, by that time, dropped out attitudinally if not physically. And there were concerns that waiting until grade 11 to introduce more rigorous courses and employ new, applied teaching methodologies would be relatively ineffective and frustrating for both students and faculty. Second, there wasn't a meaningful, structured way to include traditional vocational education programs (big mistake number one—many vocational educators feared Tech Prep would put them out of business).

As I look back on it now, those early days were important because even though we were struggling to come up with a realistic approach to Tech Prep, at least there was dialog and an honest attempt to "make it work." For simplicity and marketing reasons, the program is now known as PREParation for TECHnologies or Tech Prep for short. We did try several other titles and found most either confusing, cumbersome or both. For example, students seemed to have difficulty describing themselves as "2+2/Tech Prep/-Associate Degree" students, a term that was difficult enough for them to say let along explain to their parents. (Other programs seem to be having more success these days with that program descriptor than we experienced.)

The current program design starts in grade 9, although an interface with lower grades in curriculum and counseling is evolving, and ends at one of several points—after grade 12, after completion of a postsecondary credential at a two-year college, or after completion of a bachelor's degree. (See Figures 1 and 3 for a graphic representation of the program model and pathway options.) The major focus of the program is strong academic foundation, complemented by occupational coursework, that results in adequate preparation for community college programs and, in most cases, provides for advanced standing. The primary purpose of the program is to eliminate "gaps" and "overlaps" between secondary and postsecondary programs while providing incentives for students to stay in school, pursue postsecondary education and graduate into meaningful employment. The employment opportunities targeted by both the program and our marketing strategies are those in the mid-level technologies—careers which require some vocational training up to and including an associate degree either to enter the job field or to quality for advancement.

Because we work with seven very diverse school districts, it was apparent right from the beginning that flexibility in implementation was going to be critical. To make that work in the "real world," each partner institution (secondary and postsecondary) was, and continues to be, responsible for its own decision-making in regard to curriculum and implementation of other program components. The consortium provides the communication network that encourages dialog and the sharing of successful practices and materials. The consortium framework also includes four staff members who provide technical assistance, resources and the expertise to "tie it all together" by serving as liaisons between schools, the college and the business community. This sytem of site-based decision making, combined with a communication network across sites and a few other factors, has resulted in considerable creativity with the program concept. Tech Prep in our area now includes numerous components that fit together, complementing the curriculum, resulting in what we believe is a comprehensive and dynamic approach to Tech Prep. (See Figure 2 for a graphic representation of current program components.) Because diversity is encouraged rather than merely tolerated, all of the sites are free to move as fast as they can manage and to be as creative as they can stand. (And creativity encourages more creativity so that what one district or site develops becomes

Figure 1. PACE Model for Tech Prep

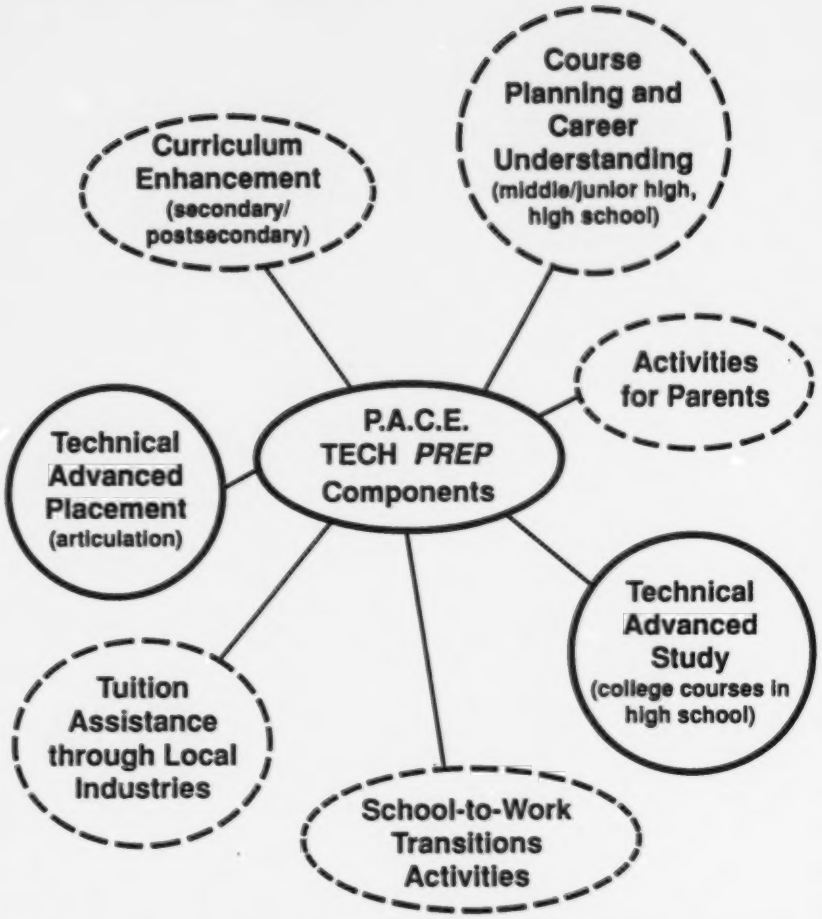

P.A.C.E. MODEL FOR TECH PREP
Career Understanding for Mid-level Technologies
(grades 6-8)
Tech Prep Curriculum
(grades 9-12)
Introduction to Technologies
(grade 9)
Academic Base
Technology Base
sequentially build students' academic skills
use new and/or enhanced courses
incorporate applications from four career cluster areas*
use applications from local employers
use existing vocational/occupational courses
students select courses to meet career goals and to qualify for advanced placement
Postsecondary (two-year college) with advanced standing
Technical Advanced Placement (articulation)
Technical Advanced Study (college courses taken during grade 12)
certificate
diploma
associate degree
+
option to earn certificate in advanced technologies
workforce/mid-level technology positions:
* industrial/engineering technology
* health technologies
* public service technologies
* business technologies

a model for another to use or improve.) An excellent example of creativity with the Tech Prep concept happened recently in terms of blending the curriculum with the concept of school-to-work transitions. In December of 1991 our largest school district decided that the combination of Tech Prep and Youth Apprenticeship was a natural. The District subsequently applied to become a national Youth Apprenticeship site through Jobs for the Future, a privately funded nonprofit organization located in Massachusetts. The district's notification of funding in February brings a whole new dimension to Tech Prep and to the level of collaboration between the district, Tri-County, area businesses and the consortium.

Using an individualized approach to implementation encourages both ownership and creativity, but it also means each site moves at its own speed. So we have some sites that are more advanced and run fairly comprehensive programs, some that are just beginning to implement certain components, and others that have no plans at the present time to add pieces that may be very important to other sites (Youth Apprenticeship is an example). We have no districts that have fully implemented Tech Prep programs. Because of the comprehensive nature of what we think Tech Prep can and should be, and because of our philosophy that Tech Prep is not "just a vocational initiative," but an educational initiative, it will take years to fully implement the curriculum and counseling frameworks. Yet, we've come to understand that Tech Prep is not just a "project" and will never be finished. It's a permanent but constantly evolving integration between levels of education and across disciplines. It's an ongoing process to develop and implement better ways of teaching and counseling. And it's a program that is responsive to changes in the business and education communities.

While our school districts and the college are all at different levels of implementation, common goals do exist and there is ample evidence of significant change. At the secondary level the primary emphasis has been on enhancing the academic preparation of students in grades 9-12 and developing career pathways combining specific academic and occupational courses around four cluster

Figure 2. PACE Tech Prep Components.


Course Planning and Career Understanding (middle/junior high, high school)
Curriculum Enhancement (secondary/ postsecondary)
Activities for Parents
P.A.C.E. TECH PREP Components
Technical Advanced Placement (articulation)
Technical Advanced Study (college courses in high school)
Tuition Assistance through Local Industries
School-to-Work Transitions Activities

(Dotted lines indicate areas where business/industry involvement occurs.)

areas (industrial/engineering technologies, business technologies, health technologies and public service technologies). All districts use or are implementing new applied academic courses in math, science and English. These courses are designed to make academic study more relevant to the "real world" and to make the learning process more motivating and participatory. While most applied courses have been developed by professional agencies, others have been developed or enhanced locally. In most cases the local development work was done collaboratively with representatives from area businesses and the college. Five of the seven districts have adopted or are quickly moving toward a dual option enrollment system—Tech Prep or College Prep. No more general education. However, because the schools are concerned with "locking" students into one curriculum over another, flexibility is built in between the options and students are always encouraged to take the highest level of coursework they can handle successfully. As a result, students may take College Prep academic courses, applied academics or a combination of both. At the conclusion of the high school portion of Tech Prep, students have three options as illustrated in Figure 3. For students who decide late in their high school career to pursue a bachelor's degree, advising occurs to help them understand the university transfer option available through two-year/technical colleges as well as transfer options from occupationally-oriented associate degree programs.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE ROLE

So what's the community college role in Tech Prep? As with everything else in our initiative, that role has been evolving. At first most of the leadership came from the college, but the nature of Tri-County's role

has changed with the development of a stronger collaborative relationship among all partners and as individual sites exerted more leadership for their own programs. While the college continues to play a key role in the Tech Prep initiative, its focus has changed from "manager" to "facilitator." That shift may seem insignificant, but it's not. It resulted from an evolving philosophy about Tech Prep and the college's role in the initiative, and from some purposeful decisions made at the highest level of the college's administration.

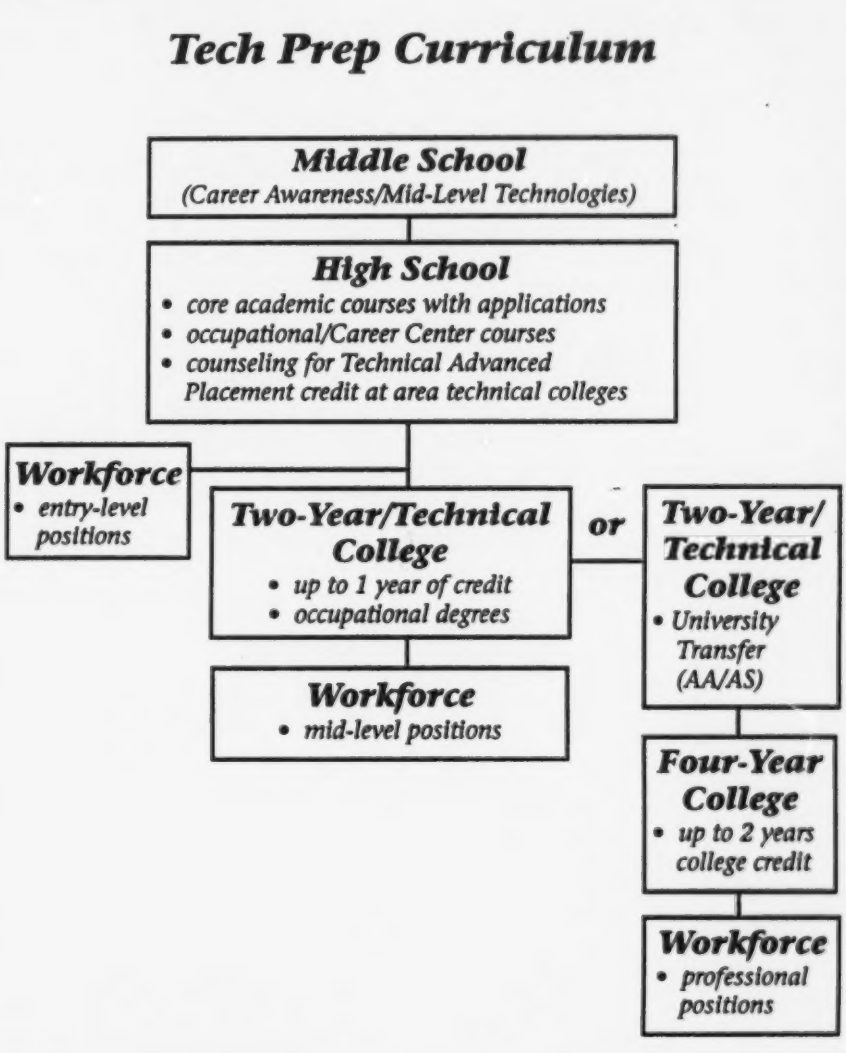
When our Tech Prep initiative began, Tri-County Technical College provided (and still provides) all the resources, directly and through grants, to support the operation of the consortium office. In the beginning, the focus probably was as much recruiting as anything else while the institutional attitude, although well intentioned, tended to be somewhat short-sighted (i. e., once this is up and running we can go on to something else). As the Tech Prep initiative matured and developed, however, so too did the college's institutional perspective, thanks to the president, the college administration and faculty and the support of the trustees who not only tolerated that shift but encouraged it. The result has been an institutional commitment to "do the right thing," to become a partner, not a manager, in developing Tech Prep as a viable educational alternative for students. This attitude translates into a commitment that recognizes linkages with the college but does not require that the program become simply "Tri-County TECH PREP." Unlike typical recruiting initiatives which tend to either escalate or diminish depending on enrollment need, Tech Prep is viewed as curriculum, as a continuous integration between secondary and postsecondary levels of education. In our case, that philosophy starts with the president and is communicated (and demonstrated) inside the college community, within the consortium and to the public.

IMPACT ON THE COLLEGE

The impact of Tech Prep on the college has been considerable and seems to grow continuously. Beyond the obvious, such as faculty/staff time in articulation and modifying policies and procedures to support advanced standing components, there have been many other ways in which Tech Prep has, or will, affect the college. To assess current and anticipated impact, an internal study was completed in 1991 listing fifteen major impact areas. The most notable impact area is increased enrollment and/or applications for admission which seem to be occurring for two primary reasons: (1) Because Tech Prep is the most comprehensive marketing (not recruiting) initiative with which the college has ever been associated; and (2) Because the impact of Tech Prep reaches many more people than the targeted student population. Information on the two-year college option, provided through multiple mechanisms, is becoming part of the "fabric" of secondary education, something that is becoming integrated into the curriculum and routine counseling activities. That is much more powerful and pervasive than we originally understood or anticipated. The potential began to dawn on me after listening to comments made on separate occasions by a junior high counselor and an assistant superintendent for instruction.

In the first instance, the counselor was conducting an orientation for rising ninth graders and, while passing out some Tech Prep materials, encouraged students to "take this home, read it carefully and teach your parents about Tech Prep and

Figure 3. Pathway Options



the opportunities it can provide." (Of course, parents and other adult family members are not only important advisors to their children but they are also potential community college students themselves, a concept that is obvious now but which had escaped me in the early days.) In the second instance, while conducting an orientation for counselors throughout his district, an assistant superintendent instructed counselors to advise all students about Tech Prep, even those headed for baccalaureate study. His reasoning? As he told the counselors, "You and I know that many students who begin bachelor's degree programs don't finish them. I want students to have 'Plan B' in the back of their minds because we put it there!" I don't know about the counselors, but his point made a big impression on me. It seems logical that many students who had first thought of higher education as an all or nothing proposition might now understand another alternative—using the two-year college to change career directions or to provide another route into the university system for financial, academic or other reasons.

Because Tech Prep emphasizes the use of career-relevant applications in academic courses, many high school teachers are now actively seeking additional materials, information and activities to help "bring the real world into the classroom." As a result, the demand has increased significantly for curriculum-related campus tours (a subtle but noticeable shift from recruiting tours), for the development of curriculum modules showing local career applications, for the involvement of the business community in terms of providing speakers, plant tours and shadowing opportunities, and for more college sponsorship of staff development activities. To meet these demands, many college faculty and staff have been involved in curriculum development teams (often including representatives from local businesses), have participated as guest speakers in high school classes, have coordinated shadowing opportunities between high school and college students, have shared information on jobs, salary ranges and advancement opportunities for their graduates, and have taught or co-facilitated teacher training institutes. And recently, faculty and staff on both levels have begun to seek additional grant opportunities to fund joint curriculum or staff development activities.

Most of the curriculum work currently associated with our Tech Prep initiative is happening at the secondary level in order to close the existing skills "gap" between high school exit points and postsecondary entry competencies. In cases where there are skills "overlaps," such as in occupational areas, the articulation process allows students to enter at an advanced level and receive credit for competencies equivalent to entry-level college courses. During the past year, however, college faculty have begun to develop "advanced technology certificates," short-term options which go beyond the associate degree. These certificates will enable Tech Prep students who enter with advanced standing to graduate with two postsecondary credentials in about the same time as it would normally take to complete an associate degree. Adult students who wish to devote an additional term or two could also complete an advanced certificate in their technology area and receive the credential, which will be documented on their transcript, to provide even greater employment oportunity. (Or previous associate degree graduates could return and complete a certificate to qualify for advancement opportunities on the job.) At this point, it appears that the concept of advanced technology certificates can accomplish several objectives important to the college. First, the certificates can help make current associate degree programs even more responsive to changing employment needs without the cost and complications of starting new degree programs. And second, the certificates can generate additional FTEs for funding purposes. (While some were initially concerned about losing funding because of advanced standing awarded to incoming high school graduates, that issue has not proven to be a problem.)

CHANGES ON THE POSTSECONDARY LEVEL

The progress made, even in these early stages, by the secondary schools in developing Tech Prep programs has caused the college to examine more closely the changes that must occur on the postsecondary level. To help meet these needs, the college applied for and received a two-year grant last September from the BellSouth Foundation to fund the expansion of postsecondary Tech Prep components. Through the grant, a full-time coordinator has been hired who will work with college faculty and staff in numerous critical need areas. Planned activities include enhancing the curriculum through the development of advanced technology certifcates, expanding articulation between high schools, Tri-County and area four-year colleges, improving teaching methodologies to complement new approaches used on the secondary level, and developing improved advising manuals for both high school and college students. Additional activities will include developing and conducting joint staff development for vocational/technical and academic faculty; developing additional joint co-op and apprenticeship opportunities; analyzing changes in secondary exit and postsecondary entry competencies and how those relate to college assessment procedures; and expanding staff development activities for college advisors and counselors. Through the BellSouth grant and others, the college is also expanding efforts to collect information from area employers and alumni and to publish that information in ways that will help explain career opportunties in the mid-level technologies. These materials will be used in the Tech Prep initiative as well as in the college's marketing and counseling programs to illustrate the outcomes of Tri-County programs.

It has also become apparent that the college must improve some of its existing procedures in order to fully benefit from the Tech Prep initiative. For example, one of the outcomes that the college hopes to realize is an increase in the number of graduates from occupational degree programs, a critical need identified by area employers. While Tech Prep may result in greater enrollment of recent high school graduates, it is up to the college to escalate its retention activities and to modify them, as necessary, to more effectively address the needs of a younger student population. In addition, current efforts in admis-

sions counseling, co-op, advising and job placement need to be reexamined, enhanced or simply coordinated more closely with the secondary system. We also see a need to improve our data collection and research systems—not only to track Tech Prep students coming from high school but to improve the reporting of outcomes back to the schools. A simple example is to provide schools with better information on their alumni, now Tri-County graduates, who could serve as speakers and even mentors for current Tech Prep students. Just like the whole Tech Prep initiative, much remains to be done on the college level, but as Tri-County's executive vice president likes to say, "These are all things we should be doing anyway."

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

As we gain more experience with progam implementation, the college has begun to see ways in which Tech Prep provides a mechanism to help meet or respond to other institutional priorities. For example, the college's commitment to more effectively recruit and retain minority students can be addressed, at least in part, through the Tech Prep initiative as can the institutional mission of providing programs and services that enhance the economic development of our local community. In fact, the Tech Prep initiative has become part of the package used to attract new businesses to the tri-county area—as a way of illustrating a proactive commitment to the "pipeline" of skilled workers and as a way of showing more effective programming between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions, both of which are funded through tax dollars. In the area of instruction, we are now investigating ways of blending Tech Prep with the college's expanded initiative to develop program-level and college-wide student competencies.

So what does Tech Prep have to offer community colleges? Plenty, but in order to turn the potential into a reality, there must be a long term vision and an ongoing commitment to work collaboratively with schools and businesses. A strong Tech Prep initiative can provide community colleges with an important mechanism to more effectively meet their community-based missions while providing better pathways to higher education for the "neglected majority." Whether or not Tech Prep becomes a true educational revolution or just another "flash in the pan" depends as much on community colleges as it does on public schools. I believe, without hesitation, that community colleges are up to the challenge.

REFERENCES

(1) This terminology is used in the generic sense to mean any institution that offers occupationally-oriented associate degree programs.

(2) American Vocational Association. The AVA Guide to the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act of 1990. Alexandria, VA: AVA, 1990.

(3) Parnell, D. The Neglected Majority. Washington, DC: Communmunity College Press Division of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1985.

Diana M. Walter has been executive director of the PACE Consortium since 1988. In 1991 she was named "Innovator of the Year" by the S.C. State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education for her accomplishments in Tech Prep program development. Also during 1991, the PACE Consortium received national awards for program excellence from both AACJC and the U.S. Department of Education. Ms. Walter is a contributing author to Tech-Prep/Associate Degree: A Win/Win Experience (Hull and Parnell, 1991) and has been a featured speaker in numerous state and national conferences on Tech Prep. Prior to her appointment to PACE, Ms. Walter served as the Coordinator for Educational Support Projects and Marketing with Tri-County Technical College in Pendleton, SC.

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